Just Nerves

By

Austen Fox Riggs

The Riverside Press Cambridge

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JUST NERVES

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BY

AUSTEN FOX RIGGS, M.D.

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TO

B. C. R.

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NOTE

Acknowledgments are due to the editors of *Mental Hygiene* for permission to reprint those parts of this book which appeared in the April, 1922, number of that journal.

INTRODUCTION

THIS is certainly a good book on a difficult subject — a sane, modest, helpful, and encouraging book — based on a true philosophy of life, verified and corrected on every page by the practical experience of a successful physician to nervous invalids.

Here is the point which Dr. Riggs makes clear in his booklet. Most of these invalids are real, not imaginary, sufferers. But the cause of their suffering is not so much a nervous *disease* as it is a nervous *disorder*. The way to cure that is to re-establish *the right order;* the reasonable rule, the self-control which is the secret of spiritual and physical health.

Of course medicine and hygiene are useful in keeping the organs of the body in good working condition, in counteracting the influence of poisonous germs, in stimulating the action of certain glands which

have gone to sleep and fallen down on their job. The wise physician prescribes his remedies according to his best judgment, taking his patient into his confidence about the effect which he wishes to produce. The sensible patient accepts the judgment of his chosen doctor and takes the prescription hopefully and cheerfully, thereby adding immensely to the efficacy of the medicine which is exhibited.

But back of all this, in nervous disorders, lies the soul —

"Vital spark of heavenly flame" —

and it is there, in that abode of personality, human and divine, that the decision between life and death must be made.

Will you, or won't you, be well?

That is the question which every nervous sufferer must answer. You must answer it for yourself. Your enemies are fear and worry and vanity and laziness and self-indulgence. Your friends are courage and obedience and humility and

patience and the sense of duty and love and God. Live with your friends. Then your doctor can help you.

This, as I understand it, is the meaning of the little book which Dr. Riggs has written out of his experience. It does not need any introduction; but I am glad to write one because I have known him since he was a very little boy, and I am sure that what he says is sound, and that he practices what he preaches — to the good of all his patients.

HENRY VAN DYKE

JUST NERVES

I

USED AND ABUSED WORDS

JUST NERVES

I

USED AND ABUSED WORDS

How often does one hear some unfortunate person's troubles tersely and somewhat contemptuously summarized by the supercilious onlooker as "just nerves"! As though now that the doctors had been unable to find a serious physical disease, there was nothing left but to condemn the still obstinately remaining disorder as "purely imaginary."

This popular prejudice against nervous disorders is, like most prejudices, based upon ignorance and misunderstanding; in this instance ignorance of the facts of human psychology and misunderstanding of the phenomena of human behavior.

Much confusion has arisen in the language which deals with mental phenom-

ena, especially during the last few years, so that before plunging into the subject of nervousness, I wish to define very briefly in just what sense I use certain much-used and much-abused terms.

In the first place, *psychology* is often given, at least by implication, many mysterious and confusing meanings. This is not surprising when one realizes that it is only during the last century that psychology has gradually emerged from the status of a pseudo-science, a sort of unimportant tail of metaphysics, into recognition for itself. In our generation its terminology has been mutilated and the pieces appropriated by dozens of semi-religious, semi-philosophical cults, false healing systems, and well-meant but misguided floods of pseudo-scientific popular books, dealing with everything which has for the public the least element of mystery in it, from the action of the digestive organs to spiritism.

Briefly, psychology is only a sort of in-

clusive physiology. It deals with human behavior; with the response of man, the wise animal, *Homo sapiens,* to his environment. Just as physiology deals with the reactions of his separate organs, and groups of organs to their extrinsic and intrinsic environment, so psychology deals with the response to environment of man as a whole. The object of human psychology is plainly, then, to interpret human behavior and finally to predict what that behavior will be under given circumstances.

Mental hygiene may be considered a subdivision of psychology, one of its medical branches. To be more definitive: it is the psychological branch of preventive medicine. It concerns itself with the ways and means, the rules and regulations necessary to normal behavior; that is, to normal response of the individual to his surroundings.

Finally, to avoid confusion let us assume a definite meaning for *environment.*

Let this term include everything not included under the term *individual.* In short, it is the world in which he "lives, moves, and has his being." It has its physical as well as its mental aspects. To both of these aspects it is the individual's problem to adjust himself. The physical elements of environment, such as food, clothing, and the avoidance of physical violence and disease, are the business of physiology, of physiological medicine, of preventive and physical hygiene, and are not therefore germane to our present subject. The mental elements of the environment, on the other hand, which are essentially the social elements, are very much our present concern. These are the elements which are definitely and specifically the business of mental hygiene.

The social aspects are *par excellence* those to which man as a *whole* reacts in terms of behavior. There are, in the first place, such things or situations which seem to threaten or protect the integrity of his

life as a whole, and which are to him markedly agreeable or disagreeable. The outstandingly important situations are, of course, made up of other people to whose lives he has to adapt himself, who, on the other hand, are adapting themselves to him. To ensure adequate and skillful adjustment to these primarily social aspects of his surroundings, to prevent the accidents and illnesses peculiar to maladjustment, in short, to help the individual to initiate and to maintain habits of normal and effective response, is the primary object of this psychological branch of preventive medicine — called mental hygiene.

Among the most frequent and the most commonly misunderstood results of poor adjustment of man to his environment is the condition which we call "nervousness." Through simply applying a little of the knowledge already formulated by mental hygiene, a great many, probably all cases, of "nervous breakdown" could be avoided. To cure this condition when once

it is established is the concern of a special branch of medicine. To do this obviously requires a knowledge of the nature of the disorder on the part of the physician. But it is not quite so obvious that a similar, though far less extensive, knowledge on the part of the prospective patient himself is required to prevent and *will* prevent these conditions from developing. This knowledge fortunately need not be as full nor as detailed as that required of the physician to cure; and equally fortunately it is true that such sufficient knowledge exists, and that furthermore it is available to any one of moderate education and intelligence. It only needs adoption by the thinking public, especially by *parents,* to cut down the incidence of nervousness to an enormous degree.

Mental Hygiene is as yet very young, but as it grows older it will grow wiser; it will offer more and more of its knowledge in usable form and there will be less and less necessity for nervousness, fewer

and fewer nervous breakdowns. Even now, it offers enough to enable us to say that nervous breakdowns are not only curable, but are distinctly *preventable* disorders.

Now, as to nervousness itself: As I have already intimated, this condition is the result of imperfect response on the part of the victim to the social aspects of his surroundings. I now wish to add most emphatically that "nervousness" is *not* a *disease,* but is a *disorder.* It is not a disease of the nerves or brain or of any other part of the body. It is not "auto-intoxication." It is not "weakness of the nerves," nor exhaustion, nor fatigue. nor a perquisite of the idle rich. It is none of these things. In other words, I want to make it quite clear that it is purely and simply the result of maladjustment on the part of an otherwise perfectly sound, essentially normal person, and that therefore it is both curable and furthermore *avoidable.*

The mentally and physically unfit obviously cannot respond normally to their surroundings. They are *inadequate*. They constitute an entirely different problem. In them we often find an exhibition of wonderful courage, resulting often in the most glorious victories — the triumphs of the handicapped. Appealing as these cases are, we must leave them to another chapter of the subject, for just now we are dealing *only* with nervousness, and this is not inadequacy but inefficiency. Our problem is the most hopeful problem of all, for we have the splendid prospect of complete cure, of absolute prevention of future failures of adjustment, of the maintenance of complete usefulness, of the saving of a vast amount of misery and suffering, not to speak of thousands of dollars' worth of wasted energy and talent; for we are dealing with good, sound, undamaged material, handicapped by mismanagement only.

II

HUMAN BEHAVIOR

II

HUMAN BEHAVIOR

NERVOUSNESS is largely a personal problem, a question of personal reactions, and the answer can best be summarized in the phrase, "Know thyself." There is no mystical implication in this phrase as I use it. It means simply, definitely and specifically that self-knowledge, psychologically and ethically, is the best assurance against nervous breakdowns. Some general impersonal understanding of normal psychology — in short, of human behavior as a whole — is manifestly the necessary foundation for this essential self-knowledge, and it is likewise the basis of mental hygiene.

Human psychology, as I have already said, resolves itself into a study of the responses of man *as a whole* to his environment. Roughly speaking, there are three

types or kinds of response into which human behavior can be divided: reflex instinctive, and acquired.

In the first place, we are each one of us born with a psychophysical apparatus which responds in its various parts reflexly to changes in its surroundings. A reflex has to do with the adjustment of a part of the body to some stimulus. For instance, let an irritating substance be applied to the mucous membrane of the nose. It responds reflexly, and the response is a sneeze. Various organs and groups of organs in our bodies respond similarly by change of function to the varying stimuli which are brought in contact with them. The stomach responds to the presence of food, and varies its function according to the nature of the food present. The pupil of the eye contracts to the stimulus of bright light, and dilates in the dark. The respiratory and circulatory organs respond reflexly to the quality of the air we breathe, on the one hand, and

the varying demands of the body for oxygen, on the other.

But the human apparatus has other inherent dynamic tendencies, which are, to all intents and purposes, highly compounded reflexes, involving not parts of the body, but the whole individual. When these are set in motion by the appropriate stimuli, the whole individual responds as a unit, and this we call *instinctive action.* Instinctive action is always accompanied by its appropriate emotion. Indeed, an emotion is an intrinsic and inseparable part of its instinct. Conversely, one may say that an instinct depends absolutely on its emotion for its dynamic force. An instinct is no more and no less than an inborn tendency to react in a certain predetermined manner to certain conditions or stimuli. For example, an infant, if hungry, reacts in a certain predetermined, characteristic way in response to food; also, if the desire for food is frustrated, we can safely predict that he will react in-

stinctively in another perfectly specific and definite manner. One instinctive reaction being frustrated, another, usually that of pugnacity, takes its place; much energy is mobilized and expressed, and in the expression we recognize that instinct's own appropriate emotion — in this case, *rage*.

As another example, consider what happens extrinsically and intrinsically when the cat sees her hereditary enemy, the dog. The response is immediate, specific, and effectual. She presents a picture of mobilized energy. The mobilization is, furthermore, absolutely appropriate for the purpose, namely, escape. The extrinsic signs of this status are stiffened muscles, rigid legs, arched back, erect tail, and bristling hair. Intrinsically there are other signs. The heart is beating rapidly, sending a greatly increased amount of blood to the muscles, and to all other organs of locomotion. That blood, furthermore, carries to the motor apparatus increased

quantities of readily oxidizable material from the internal, so-called ductless glands. The digestive organs, not being needed for the emergency, are in a state of temporary paralysis — put temporarily out of business, so to speak. All of these internal as well as external changes are part and parcel of the emotion of fear. The cat undoubtedly feels the emotion as an irresistible impulse which, with remarkable swiftness, impels her to escape. Presumably without thought, as mechanically as a gun is discharged by a pull on the trigger, the cat at the sight of the dog runs. Should she meet an unclimbable fence, the instinct of escape will immediately be replaced by the instinct of pugnacity and quite as inevitably will she turn with rage to fight her pursuer.

Thus, if one studies the behavior of animals, one sees instinctive action in its pure, unaltered form, especially in wild animals. For instance, a loud noise to most animals is the adequate stimulus to set in motion

the instinct of escape, and the emotion fear, which is an essential part of this instinct, literally lends wings to the animal's flight.

The third variety of action in human behavior is that of acquired modes of response. These are largely modifications of instinctive reactions. These modifications are brought about by training the intelligence and will, which are as conspicuous by their *absence* among animals as they are by their *presence* in man.

For instance, we *learn* — that is, we acquire the habit — to respond in certain conventional ways to the presence of tempting viands. If acting instinctively and without acquired control, we should respond to the smell and sight of food by simply devouring it, and if interfered with, we should as simply fly into a rage and fight. Furthermore, we learn to modify our instinctive actions by intelligent control, not only for the purpose of substituting some opposite action more ap-

propriate to the occasion, such as doing the right and intelligent thing, even though fear, let us say, bids us run away, but we train the very instincts themselves to greater perfection of action. We may become skillful fighters if need arise, as well as self-forgetful and reasonably self-sacrificing citizens.

There are two important elements which profoundly affect human behavior and which vary greatly in strength in any given individual. The first of these is *temperament.* This is a qualifying characteristic. Briefly described, it is a tendency to be over-sensitive or under-sensitive to such items in the environment as usually produce in any one markedly painful or markedly pleasurable sensations and emotions. Over-sensitiveness to one's own emotions and sensations naturally leads to over-valuation of their significance and importance, which of course directly affects behavior. If a sensation or

an emotion is valued as a very disagreeable one, and almost intolerable in itself, one's thoughts and efforts are naturally bent on getting rid of it or modifying it. If, for instance, one is over-sensitive to the disagreeableness of fear and fear itself is therefore over-valued, it is treated as an item to be avoided at all costs and life is accordingly modified, consciously or unconsciously.

The other element which is difficult to define, and which I shall not even attempt to describe, but which must be reckoned with as of the greatest importance in human behavior, is that which we call *spiritual.* It expresses itself more or less concretely in ideals. These ideals are frequently in conflict with our instinctive demands, and this conflict, through its interference with the realization of ideals through action, constitutes the fundamental problem of human conduct.

On the one hand, animals, without the power of choice, presumably without

spiritual impulses, are impelled in any situation by whatever happens to be the instinct or instincts aroused by the then present environmental stimuli. They do not preside over the conflict of instincts nor presumably is there any conflict between the strongest instinctive impulse and some ideal demand. They are frankly and simply subject to their instincts and their behavior is proportionately simple and direct. A cat, when she sees her enemy, the dog, feels the emotion of fear which puts all of her machinery of flight into action. Unless the expression of this instinct is blocked by an insuperable obstacle, her flight continues until the emotional force is exhausted. If the flight is blocked, the instinct of escape is immediately replaced by the newly aroused instinct of pugnacity, and she quite as inevitably fights. But all of this presumably without choice or without reason.

On the other hand, the human being presides over the conflict of his own in-

stincts, felt by him as a conflict of emotions. He presides over this conflict with intelligence and with a consciousness of the power and necessity of choice. This would be a comparatively simple process if it consisted merely of choosing which instinct was to have expression; or if it were only a matter of choosing which was the most expedient manner of obeying that instinct; whether hiding, running, or "playing 'possum" would satisfy the situation. The strongest instinct would always win, and it would be merely a matter of adding intelligent planning to instinctive action to make that action more effective. However, fortunately or unfortunately the other great element which I mentioned comes in with its demands — namely, the spiritual. The ideal of service and self-sacrifice may demand of a man, whose instincts would drive him simply and quickly away from danger, that he shall stand fast and neither hide nor "play 'possum," but sacrifice himself without

recompense of any sort, except the spiritual, even to complete self-destruction. It is when intelligence and will are used, to realize an ideal through an action which is contrary to instinctive demands, that animal behavior rises to the dignity of human conduct. To keep instinctive forces under the intelligent control of the will, in order to realize through these very forces our ideals — that is to live a civilized life, a happy life, and furthermore a healthy life.

III

MODERN LIFE AND THE OVER-SENSITIVE

III

MODERN LIFE AND THE OVER-SENSITIVE

THE inherent instinctive outfit of man, it is safe to assume, is very much the same, very little altered since history began. He is very much the same animal as he has always been. He has the same reflexes, the same instincts, the same primary emotions, and probably very much the same intelligence as he has always had. In short, during the history of civilization this original outfit — all of these fundamental inherent elements — has presumably been changed but little. But his environment — that has changed enormously and with great rapidity. The mode of life in a single generation has often changed from that of primitive man fighting for survival in a frontier wilderness to the highly civilized and complex existence of city life.

The physical elements of man's environment, it is true, have changed greatly during the progress of history, but these changes are not of a kind to tax his adaptation severely. To be free from the hardships of hunger and cold and exhaustion; to be warm, well-fed and well-housed, and no longer subject to exhausting physical strains, requires a very little and a very simple sort of adaptation. But the social complexity, the multiplication of tempting opportunities that such physical changes imply — these do tax his power of intelligent adaptation. The social factors have undergone an enormous change, from primitive simplicity to their present complexity and rapidity, and it is this rather than the physical change which makes adaptation difficult. Physical comfort and safety, it would seem, have been won through multiplying the mental and moral risks.

Ease of communication by rapid transit, telephone, telegraph, labor-saving de-

vices, and all sorts of time and space annihilators, are the things which, in my opinion, are largely responsible for our difficulties of adjustment. These labor- and time-saving devices are highly beneficial in themselves — as labor-saving devices. They broaden one's horizon, multiply one's opportunities, and are capable of saving much energy and of conserving leisure, if wisely used. Only when they are used as leisure-killers, only when we allow them to tempt us into trying to do three things at once, making two blades of grass grow where only one grew before; only when we use them to accomplish the impossible, to crowd a life's work into a few years — are they harmful; but then they become the very instruments of the Devil.

Think of the difference between the mental processes of the modern business man and those of his old-fashioned prototype of the nineteenth century. In that golden and primitive past, whole days would be consumed in the completion of

an only moderately important business transaction. A good bit of friendly intercourse and social entertainment, much that was gracious in manner and speech, form to the point of elaboration, were considered assets in those courtly olden days. Such time-consuming processes were part and parcel of the old-time merchant's business activity. There probably was no such thing as the chronically tired business man, for everything he did was comfortably packed about and upholstered with little pleasant, healthful things that took time.

Compare the old-fashioned picture with what we are familiar with in the modern business man's office. He arrives by rapid transit, elevated, automobile, or what-not, or even by airplane, at a huge noisy structure which he enters, joining a crowded, hurrying stream of other preoccupied speed maniacs. Having taken not more than perhaps a hundred steps since breakfast, he is shot upward at a terrific rate, probably in an express elevator, and

is hastily ejected at the twentieth story within a half-dozen steps of his office. There, if his organization is "up-to-date," he will find things already started, perhaps going full tilt. His mail is already opened, even sorted for him. He does not waste the fraction of a minute between shedding his hat and coat and beginning to dictate his replies and give his orders. Even while dictating, he will hold not one but several conversations of importance on the telephone, and before finishing these it is more than likely that he will be starting a third activity of some sort, such as interviewing a client. In short, he does probably in an hour, of what to him is an ordinary business day, as much as the old-fashioned chap did in a week. Does he leave the office any earlier because of this wonderful speed? Does he gain leisure? No, indeed; he stays just as long or longer, but he makes more money. It hardly needs scientific argument to prove which type of life means longevity,

let alone contentment, happiness, and health.

I do not mean to imply that the modern citizen is less intelligent or is less wise than his forefathers. On the contrary, I believe that the problem is far more hopeful, for I am sure that he is *just* as wise, *just* as intelligent, and has all the wisdom of his forefathers' accumulated experience to draw on, if only he would. But I think it is clear without argument that, be he wiser or less wise, his modern environment calls for the exercise of greater wisdom, for greater adaptability, than was necessary a century or more ago. Obviously there is greater speed, greater emotional strain, a greater tendency to let quantity of effort spoil the quality of life. In short, the great wealth of opportunity is fraught with the danger of a greatly increased temptation to unwisdom.

Yet it is true that normal, evenly balanced people — that is, the great majority of people — can and do most successfully

adapt themselves to these entirely extraordinary factors of modern life. But to the inherently over-sensitive individuals this present environment of ours offers increasingly tempting dangers and pitfalls. For the hypersensitive, more emotional person tends to *over*-react, especially to things which normally produce markedly painful or markedly pleasurable emotions in most of us, and especially to avoid such things as produce markedly painful reactions. Thus the behavior of a certain minority of people tends to be impulsive, emotional, instinctive. It tends, therefore, to be unplanned, hurried, incomplete and superficial, and clashes with the strident, speedful world of the present. Instead of guiding themselves wisely among the environmental difficulties, they succumb to its temptations and dangers. These over-sensitive and over-emotional people tend to act according to how they feel, and then to apply judgment and will only when it is practically too late.

Wishes and fears tend to distort thoughts. We all tend to believe rather what we wish were true than what is true. But when this characteristic is exaggerated, perhaps chiefly through lack of training, it obviously makes for poor adjustment to the world as it is, and maladjustment leads directly to malcontent. Malcontent frequently expresses itself in the pseudo-philosophies and cults which describe the world, not as it is, but as they wish it were.

The nihilist and anarchist, the parlor Bolshevik, the cubist, and the free love doctrinaire are examples of essentially maladjusted and discontented people. They imagine a world which in each case shall contain the element which they most crave personally, and a world also which shall be free from the obstacles to achievement and obstructions to self-expression which they have found most difficult, and most annoying. A world of commerce without money, capital, or labor, without

management or competition. A social world without laws or customs. A world, in short, without those restrictions and necessities to which they have found adjustment difficult, and which they wrongly blame for their own mediocrity or lack of success. A world where their weaknesses shall be assets, where their supposed strengths shall make them leaders without competition or effort.

These people are essentially neurasthenic; that is, they are nervous. If they could be given self-knowledge, it would cure all of them, and they would then find contentment and happiness in accepting their world as it is as the basic starting-point for good work, as the raw material out of which to forge success.

As an example of how ignorance of the essentials of a problem in personal adjustment leads to a poor solution, war neurosis is most instructive. (This condition, by the way, is often misnamed *shell shock,* for the shock of a near-by exploding shell is

only very rarely associated with the beginning of the disorder.) A man, usually somewhat hypersensitive to his own emotions, often with an essentially timid personality, finds himself in a position of extreme danger, or if not actually in the position of danger, on his way toward it. His ideals of honor, of service, and of loyalty push him onward toward the goal from which his instinct of self-preservation, through the emotion of fear, is doing its best to hold him back. Through misconception he has learned to consider fear as synonymous with cowardice. His own essential self-esteem excludes cowardice from his idea of self. Indeed, as a matter of fact, he *knows* he is not a coward. Therefore, it is impossible for him in the face of this prejudice to recognize or acknowledge the presence of fear. Fear, however, is what every normal man must feel when in danger, and, furthermore, this emotion, like all emotions, is not just a mental state, but is actually also a bodily

state, a state of mobilization of bodily forces, a state of preparation for immediate flight, and it has very marked and *noticeable* physical signs. Among these are a rapid and often irregular heart, tremor of the muscles, a dry mouth and disturbances of the stomach and intestines. He cannot help being disturbed by these physical disorders, which, largely because they are neither understood nor recognized, become exaggerated. They finally constitute a bodily condition which becomes the innocent focus of his fear. Fear of breaking down physically he can recognize and can acknowledge without prejudice to his character. He can with spiritual safety be afraid that his physical condition will interfere with his carrying out his ideal of service. In short, he can recognize a fear of failure from bodily causes over which he has no control, whereas, in his ignorance, he cannot acknowledge that he is afraid of being killed or horribly maimed. The emotional state becomes ever more

tense, its physical symptoms more marked, until they dominate the picture, and he is actually disabled by disordered or paralyzed bodily function. The deadlock of the conflict between his ideal of service and his instinct of escape is incidentally broken by the condition produced by the emotion, for that condition makes it physically impossible for him to go on, and much against his will he is *ordered* to the rear — a case of "shell shock."

Had he known that fear is the one occasion and the only occasion for courage, and that it is *not* synonymous with cowardice; had he had sufficient knowledge of his own psychology to have recognized fear as part of the normal and universal reaction of any human being to danger, and that courage is the spirit in which one does things in the face of fear — his problem would have been a very simple one; namely, whether or not he could do his duty, even in spite of being filled with fear. He might have had — probably

would have had — a short but decisive moral struggle, but he would have brought his will to bear upon a clean-cut, soluble problem, and he would undoubtedly have gone through successfully.

The same is exactly true of the more complicated neuroses of ordinary civil life. Knowledge of the factors of the problem of adjustment is the first step and the absolutely essential step toward a successful solution; and, as in war neurosis, given the requisite knowledge, we can be quite sure of finding the strong desire, the will to get well, ready to apply itself to the problem as soon as the latter can be made clear and definitive.

IV

CHILDHOOD TRAINING

IV

CHILDHOOD TRAINING

To prevent the occurrence of "nervousness" is, then, obviously the problem of preventing maladjustment. Whether tender-mindedness is acquired by early contagion from nervous elders, by lack of training as in a spoiled child, or is partly inherited, may be left as an academic question. However this and other elements that make for nervousness may arise, it is the business of Mental Hygiene to recognize these elements as early as may be, so that, being recognized, they may be trained from being liabilities to being assets. The time for this recognition and training is in childhood, for it is then that the seed of nervousness is sown.

I believe that the following are the most important of these elements which tend toward nervousness on the one hand and

are particularly amenable to training on the other.

The temperamental tendency to being over-sensitive to the markedly painful or markedly pleasant emotions and sensations is perhaps the most common and fundamental element which, if unrecognized and uncorrected, makes for later nervous breakdowns. This element is recognizable even in the early months of life. Whether it be inherited in part or in whole, or merely acquired by circumstances, is not important to our present discussion. That it is recognizable in very young children is most important, for this fact presents one of the earliest and most hopeful opportunities for training.

All of us, especially when we are children, are sensitive to our own emotions to a greater or less extent and are especially appreciative of the pleasurable emotions. But a certain proportion of children are *over*-sensitive to emotions, particularly to painful emotions. They give physical evi-

dence of this extra sensibility by over-reacting physically to correction, disapproval, and punishment. They show the over-reaction most often not only in being over-prone to weep, but also in disturbances of digestion and circulation. They may lose their appetites, their bowels may become disturbed, or they may even react emotionally to painful situations by an attack of vomiting.

On the side of circulation, they are the children who blush and blanch easily. They may also show an over-excitability of their kidneys and sweat glands. In short, they perspire too easily under excitement, cry too easily, and likewise their overactive kidneys, under the same circumstances, may lead to one of the most embarrassing accidents of childhood. Too often this latter unavoidable accident meets with severe and unjust punishment.

On the mental side they show a greater dependence than normal on praise and approval and especially an exaggerated sen-

sitiveness to disapproval. They show the latter by avoiding conflict with authority as much as possible, either by exaggeratedly good behavior or by deception and lying. Their repulsion to the disagreeable — whether it have to do with the touch of a disagreeable surface or substance or a disagreeable taste, or with being too easily and too markedly influenced to avoidance of such things as may arouse in them a painful emotion, such as fear — is evident and conspicuous.

These signs of the over-sensitive temperament, as I say, are easily recognized in early childhood and call for definite training. Usually they are noticed but rarely are they understood, and often quite the wrong training is applied. Punishments are made too drastic; or the parents sedulously plan to avoid all discipline wherever possible and so to arrange the environment for the child as to avoid wherever possible the production of fear or any other disagreeable reaction. Both

of these extremes are apt to lead to the same result, namely, an increase in the sensitiveness, a further accentuation of the very handicap which they are intended to remove.

On the other hand, the training should have in view the distinct object of moulding the sensitiveness itself into a useful force. The first steps of this training are to give the child a true valuation to tolerance of the disagreeable, and to help him to a realization of the naturalness and normality of the emotion of, let us say, fear, which only needs a little courage to combat it. At the same time, an appreciation of the necessity and importance of adapting himself to the needs of his play-fellows can be aroused through stimulating his interest in team-play which makes a good basis for normal courage. For instance, instead of telling a child that he is silly to be afraid to go into the dark room, that there is nothing there to hurt him, that he *ought* not to be afraid, or that he is a baby

to be afraid, he should be told that *of course* he is afraid, that lots of other children are afraid of the dark, even though there is nothing to be afraid of. He should be shown that being afraid is one of those disagreeable things that we can get over by not thinking too much of it, and that, at all events, he is of course going into the dark room to get the game or book he wants, because he wants it. He can thus be shown, by the actual demonstration of going into the dark room and getting the desired game in spite of fear, in the first place how harmless that little fear of his really is, and in the second how comparatively easy and fully worth while it was to get the game. A little victory, but lots of fun when won. Every effort should be made, in other words, to accentuate the importance and desirability, the satisfaction and fun, in free objective action *in spite* of, rather than *because* of, sensitiveness. Every effort should be made to make the interest in doing things and the results

of doing things always stronger and more enticing than the abnormal and introspective interests that the child may have in his own emotional reactions.

Such training, for instance, is quite capable of turning timidity into habitual courage, sympathetic pain into the professional understanding and practical purposive sympathy of the genuine physician or nurse. Such training can transmute sensitiveness to color or sensitiveness to sound into intelligent appreciation and thus make of it the professional understanding of the successful artist or musician. One can turn this sensitiveness by such training into useful objective appreciation of the physical and social environment, including the needs of others. Thus a liability can be turned into an asset.

The second element making for nervousness, which is, as you will see, largely dependent on the first, is disturbance of the balance of instincts. By this I mean an over-prominence, an over-irritability of

one or more of the instincts over the others. Usually this also is recognizable in very early life and the temperamental sensitiveness just described is always associated with it. Indeed, *it* is the instinctive force which gives sensitiveness specific form.

Usually the instincts of self-preservation, escape and pugnacity, one, sometimes both of them, with their respective emotions of fear and anger, are the moving forces in the second element making for maladaptation. This specific sort of sensitiveness is indeed easy to recognize at an early stage. Who cannot recognize even in infancy the markedly timid or the markedly pugnacious personality in a child? The timid, shrinking child and the irritable, pugnacious child, subject to fits of temper, are too well known both physically and mentally to need further description. The former I think is more apt to be headed for nervousness than the latter, though even the latter, if he be of

sensitive temperament, is a neurotic risk.

The training of this element, if not easy, is certainly plain. The child must be taught to acknowledge the presence of the emotion, whether it be anger or fear or whatever. He must learn to treat it, not as an enemy, but as a natural part of himself. He must *not* be taught to deny its existence or to make-believe through repression that it does not exist. He must be taught to say to himself, "I am mad, or I am afraid, *but* I can *do* as I choose"; and he must be held responsible for that choice. Gradually his interest in growing up to be an effective actor, an effective performer of acts of which he approves, must be built up. Coincidentally good-natured contempt for his own emotions should be established; that is, contempt for the painful element in emotion and sensation. To be a "good sport" rather than a slave of fear or anger must be made an understandable and, furthermore, an attractive proposition. To make disci-

pline seem always to be self-discipline rather than superimposed, I believe to be an important point. Punishment as far as possible, perhaps always, should be to the child as much as possible an obviously inevitable result of his own action rather than the outgiving of the judgment, backed up by the power, of that superior being, his parent. The parent should stand to him rather as a wise friend, whose judgment he believes in and wants to follow, than as the strong arm that carries out a little understood law. I believe these rules hold good no matter what over-active instinct we are dealing with, whether it be the instinct of escape, of pugnacity, or even the sex instinct. Our object is to train the child to guide the energies and impulses supplied him by his instincts, not to deny nor suppress them, and above all not to be subject or slave to them. In short, the object of training is to make a civilized citizen out of a little, perhaps overly strong, animal.

The third item in the personal equation which needs recognition and calls for training appears later in life than the first two. It has to do with difficulty in realization of the spiritual element where either ideals are unformed or fail in adequate expression because of instinctive or temperamental obstacles. For lack of a better term I will call this *character fault* or *weakness*. The signs of this tendency are absent from the physical point of view, except perhaps in the matter of those indefinite signs of facial expression and form which we rightly or wrongly attribute to strength or weakness of character, such as the "square" jaw, the "loose" lip, or the "wavering" eye. The element, however, can be definitely recognized by a comparison of the individual's behavior with his professed ideals, and by noting a prominent feature which is always there, namely, *unreliability*. People with sensitive temperaments and unbalance of instincts always remind me of an electrical

apparatus which is suffering from a tendency to short circuit. A person with character faults, on the other hand, resembles an electrical apparatus where the wires just fail to make connection and the current of energy from the ideal to the apparatus of expression fails to get through. They know theoretically what is right, they are not moral idiots, but they fail to make good their ideals in action with any reliability.

The training of this tendency takes perhaps more tact, more delicacy of touch, and more sympathy than do all the others, for it calls for practical moral training, and by this I do not mean continual punishments nor old-fashioned "moral suasion," which no doubt has its place, nor picturing in lurid colors the "way of the transgressor." It consists rather in showing the adolescent child how his technique has failed, just where a little determination would have made the connection; in showing the practical advantages of regu-

larity both physical and mental, the efficiencies to be attained by a planned life, the ease to be gained by the momentum of regular habits, and last but not least the fundamental necessity to him of contentment above comfort, of happiness above pleasure; and finally in proving that these can be attained only by running the ordinary ideals of life straight through the instinctive apparatus to practical everyday action.

There is a fourth type of disorder which tends to nervousness which is important enough to afford a separate classification. The human young, unlike the young of the other animals, tend to develop irregularly. The intellectual side of a child may develop far ahead of the physical and even of the moral. This irregularity is not hard to recognize, especially not by the proud parent who is only too ready to acknowledge precocity of intellect in his own offspring. Unfortunately, only too often the

proud parent, instead of turning such a child's energies more toward the development of those elements which are lagging behind, namely, the physical, will, in his pride and delight in the child's cleverness, push his already over-developed intellect to further precocity. In extreme cases the "infant phenomenon" is developed, who rarely if ever escapes an even more serious breakdown than common nervousness. Obviously the training of such a child should be aimed toward balancing his development by increasing his physical strength and well-being. Out-of-door games and exercises and interest in nature studies should be emphasized, rather than progress in mathematics; woodcraft rather than Latin. All of this can be done without any undue neglect of the purely intellectual development. Indeed, it would surely be just the right kind of intellectual development for the physically backward child to turn his interest and reasoning power toward the phenomena of nature and his own growing physical prowess.

When the physical development is obviously ahead of the intellectual, which is easily discovered by the child having to study harder and getting poorer results than the average — usually to the unreasonable despair of his parents — then the intellectual and moral side of the individuality call for development; but this can be done only gradually, not suddenly. Regularity of life in these cases is particularly important. The child should be taught to guide the instinctive forces into purposive channels by gradually introducing simple objective, purposive, mental effort in relation to outdoor play and exercise, of which such a child is probably already fond. More important than even constructive play is constructive work, both mental and manual, and for such children the educational value of physics, mathematics, and, above all, of manual training, cannot be over-estimated. Gradually to stimulate interest in achievement, gradually to arouse curiosity in the

"why" of the things which the child up to then has merely taken animal pleasure in, by stimulating interest in nature and nature's laws, and gradually working through biology to other sciences, is gently to lead intellectual development on apace, till it matches the physical.

When the moral element lags behind, the same method of treatment should be employed as I have roughly outlined as appropriate for character faults. But we should be especially careful not to harden by constant and severe disapproval. We should try in every way to accentuate our appreciation and approval wherever we can find even a slight excuse for it, in something well done and for a good purpose. You can always depend upon it that the child will react toward and will be attracted to the pleasurable emotions aroused by approval and praise, as readily, at least, as he reacts *away* from the pain of displeasure and disapproval. In short, we must show the child who is back-

ward in moral development that it *pays to be good,* and to do this we must praise every good point; and, on the other hand, disapproval, when we show it, must be shown only for a purpose and not because we are angry. It is only through utmost patience and always sympathetic effort that we can hope to make social adaptation seem a worth-while process and a necessity to the morally backward child. To make moral response habitual and reliable must be not only a labor of love, but one of unwavering faith and patience.

Modern life, especially the life of the well-to-do, is in many ways poor training, very poor mental hygiene, for the growing child. It presents too much superimposed entertainment. This entertainment, furthermore, has excitement rather than healthful pleasure as its main objective. Movies and theater parties *might* be all very well, but are they? They *might* be opportunities for constructive and in-

structive play, innocent amusement and interest, but usually they are not. In the first place, such entertainments are far too frequent in the average child's life, and in the second place, they result in nine cases out of ten, not in interest, but excitement. Coupled with dances lasting to all hours of the night they constitute an active menace to the child's mental health. The result is that most melancholy sight of modern times — the over-old, blasé youngster who demands there shall and must be "something doing" every moment. Through no fault of his own, he has developed within him an abnormal appetite for excitement, on the one hand, and, on the other, a pretty complete ignorance of the real pleasures of play; and unless he is a very evenly balanced, stable, individual he is fairly on his way to become a neurotic. Public playgrounds, child athletics, and games where the real pleasure of play comes from the successful exercise of energy, make for health and stability,

and not only balance work, but keep the appetite for work, for achievement, alive; whereas movies and modern superimposed entertainment, with just excitement as an unacknowledged goal, make for unbalance, discontent, and nervousness.

A modern child, especially a girl, is dangerously apt to skip from the mental and social age of twelve almost overnight to that of eighteen. This forcing process of modern social life suddenly ejects her from innocent childhood into the status of a society woman. She skips, and thus loses utterly those wonderful years of natural fun, of growth of interest, of development of character, of the gradual unfolding of the knowledge of life; those wonderful "teens," which should be lived joyously and as slowly as may be. These should be the years of the most valuable formative training, and too often nowadays are they exploded out of existence by the forced high tension of the modern régime. These years should be guarded, should be utilized

for our children's gradual growth and development, and if they are so utilized they will cheat the nerve specialist of many of his cases.

I have dealt with Mental Hygiene only where it touches my subject, Nervousness, its causes and prevention. I have spoken of the knowledge already extant, which if applied would in my opinion prevent nervousness. Much of this knowledge you will see is quite obvious, long known, not original nor exciting. True, but that probably is the very reason it has not been applied. No doubt much of it is too ordinary or too obvious to invite attention, and no doubt has therefore been neglected.

Most often nervousness has its beginnings in childhood; therefore it is in childhood that preventive training should be applied. Obvious, but none the less true.

The recognizable symptoms of potential nervousness are:

1. Sensitiveness to the disagreeable and painful.

2. Overbalance of one or more instincts.

3. Faults in application of intelligence and ideal to instinctive forces (character faults); and lastly,

4. Unevenness in the relative development of the physical, mental, and moral sides during growth.

One or more of these is always the fundamental cause of that maladaptation called *nervousness*. It is obvious, I trust, that early recognition is not only necessary but possible to all. Obvious or not, it is the truth.

If these tendencies should be and can be recognized, to overcome their influence, it is only necessary to train the child accordingly and this then becomes largely a matter of applying common sense to a clean-cut, formulated problem. To this end all of us, especially parents and teachers, need only a mere working knowledge of everyday psychology. It is a simple

matter to apply such knowledge in the form of mental hygiene, to the upbringing of our children as well as to the ordering of our own lives.

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COMMON-SENSE RULES

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COMMON-SENSE RULES

To *avoid* "nervous breakdowns" in adult life it is only necessary to maintain one's mental and moral efficiency. This can be made a simple, straightforward matter by following a few more or less simple and common-sense rules. These rules can be readily deduced from everyday psychology and common experience. If adopted and applied steadily, they will prove beyond a doubt that "nervousness" can be avoided.

Here follow a few such practical suggestions, more or less formulated specifics against becoming "nervous":

1. Neither run away from emotions nor yet fight them. Accept them as the wellsprings of all action. They are your automatically mobilized energies, and you may, within very wide limits, do with

them what you choose. You may, furthermore, do what you choose, again within broad limits, in the way, in the manner, in which you choose to do it. By doing what you choose, in the way you choose, you force these energies into the channels of your choice. It is like guiding spirited horses — you guide, they obey, not their own impulses, but your will. A simple suggestion, but, if followed, it leads one safely away from the dangers of sensitiveness and unbalance of instinct.

2. Be efficient in what you do. First approve the purpose of the act, then perform that act in a manner and with the means that are appropriate to its purpose. Efficiency or inefficiency is determined by the relation between effort expended and result obtained. Obviously the result must be worth the effort. Nothing is worth doing that is not worth doing *well,* but "well" must include not only the attainment of the gross end in view, but it must also mean attainment without waste of

effort. Quality of effort appropriate to the end, skill rather than crude force, means efficiency. In short, do not drive your tacks with a sledgehammer. There is a better, less fatiguing way. Find out how easily you can do things well, and take pride in such skill.

3. Do one thing at a time. Only thus can we practice concentration. By concentration I do *not* mean that violent overdramatization of effort usually understood as concentration, but the gentle art of controlling the attention. This art consists almost entirely of many, oft-repeated, small acts of skillful selection. It is really no more than gently culling from the stream of thought that which is interesting and relevant to the object of the moment, and secondarily discarding all else. Above all, it is not a violent, sustained moral effort.

4. Make clean-cut practical decisions. To be clean-cut they must deal with problems clearly stated and as free from emo-

tional prejudice as may be. To be practical they must deal with problems of present moment and relevancy, with probability rather than possibility, with the concrete rather than the vague. Finally decisions must be valued, not as irrevocable oaths or unretractable contracts, but as mere decisions, subject to change in the face of new facts or additional knowledge.

5. Do not accept hurry as a necessary part of modern life. If hurry in any given case becomes necessary, it has become so solely because there has been a direful lack of plan, or because tardiness and procrastination have spoiled the plan, or lastly because one has tried to crowd two or more things into the temporal space of one. Quality of work, not quantity, spells success, and quality is destroyed by hurry.

6. The worst enemy of efficiency, as well as the best ally of nervousness, is worry. Worry is a complete circle of inefficient thought whirling about a pivot of fear. To avoid it, consider first whether

the problem in hand is actually your business. If it is *not,* turn to something that is. If it *is* your business, decide next whether it be your business *now.* If it be your business and your business now, decide what is the wisest and most efficient thing to do about it. If you know, get busy and do it; if you do not know, if you lack knowledge, seek the knowledge you need and seek it now. Do these things, and in nine cases out of ten anxiety will not degenerate into worry. If the actual probabilities are so very bad that intense anxiety is unavoidable, nevertheless, apply this mechanical rule, and then assert your faith and your courage; realize that success for you, as for others, is always an approximation of the ideal. Then rest your case on the determination that no matter how hard things may turn out to be, you will make the best of them — and more than that no man can do. In short, common sense can put worry out of the running in most cases, but always faith is essential to real victory.

7. Keep work, play, rest, and exercise in their proper relative proportions; not only in the space of decades, but year by year, month by month, week by week, and day by day. Keep these items separated. Work when you work; play when you play; and do nothing when you rest. Each item has its *daily* place, and a well-planned life is a life made up of well-planned days. Such a life absorbs emergencies without strain.

8. Shun the New England conscience. It is a form of egotism which makes a moral issue of every trivial thought or feeling. Its motive is self-defense, defense of self from the possibility of guilt or consciousness of moral error. It takes the adventure out of life, and fills it instead with endless petty, safety-first devices, clogging its machinery and warping it out of true. To live fully and with reasonable ease, one must take one's own fundamental decency more or less for granted, and be willing to take at least ordinary chances

of being wrong. Soul-harrowing analyses to prove one's moral impeccability are merely expressions of nothing better than worry about self, and the same rules apply to this sort of worry as to all other sorts.

9. Energy is often wasted by a peculiar process which many people seem to think necessary before they can do anything, especially anything that promises to be difficult. I refer to a sort of "getting up steam," a kind of moral mobilization, an attitude of "girding up the loins," mentally speaking, which is referred to by them as "making up their minds," or "getting ready" to do something. It is not a decision, but usually follows one as a sort of preliminary flourish before action. It is really only picking up a moral sledgehammer, and an imaginary one at that, when a practical decision has already cleared the way, and nothing remains to be done save to begin immediate action. When a decision has been reached, when something has to be done, waste no time in mobilizing extra energy, just do it.

10. Lastly, to avoid breaks in character, breaks between your ideals and your everyday actions, recognize that your problem is fundamentally the same as every one else's, no matter what your particular job may be. This problem of ours, reduced to its common denominator, is to keep our ideal clear, to adopt purposes which shall serve these ideals, and lastly to make our ideals live in practical, purposive everyday action. To do this, it is first necessary to accept the material of life as plenty good enough for us, as definitely *our* material, awaiting only our workmanship to be forged into success. This should be our method of making our dreams come true, of living up to our great illusion. Therefore, waste no time in kicking against the pricks. The "divine unrest" of ambition is a noble spur to better action, but the restlessness of discontent is a miserable state of misunderstanding. Beware the contrary currents of anger, fear, and pride, but turn the

strength of these currents into the channels of your purposes. Do not criticize your part in the play, study it, understand it, and then *play* it, sick or well, rich or poor, with *faith,* with courage, and with proper *grace.*

To follow these rules absolutely and to the letter is certainly somewhat beyond the power of human frailty, but to follow the spirit, to steer one's course by some such compass, is both possible and practical. Thus, and only thus, can one maintain a good, safe offing from the shoals and reefs of nervousness.

THE END

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